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Raising the Minimum Legal Sales Age for Tobacco Products in Nebraska

Center for Health Policy

Mission: The Center for Health Policy evaluates policies and conducts research to improve population health and the efficiency and effectiveness of the healthcare system in Nebraska and the United States.

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Background

An increasing number of state and local governments have raised the minimum legal sales age (MLSA) for tobacco products in recent years.^{1,2} Currently, two states (Hawaii and California) and nearly 200 municipalities in other states have increased their MLSA to 21.³ These include 18 cities and towns in the neighboring states of Kansas and Missouri, such as Kansas City.³ Alaska, Alabama, New Jersey, and Utah have a MLSA of 19.¹ Although Nebraska prohibits the sale of tobacco products to persons under the age of 18, prior studies suggest that raising the age to 21 may have an impact on youth smoking. For example, Needham, Massachusetts, was the first municipality to increase the legal age to 21.¹ Studies on the impact of this policy are limited, but show a substantial impact on smoking among those younger than 18. Increasing the MLSA reduces opportunities by youth to acquire cigarettes through social networks. For example, one study reported that 59% of 18 and 19 year olds are asked to purchase cigarettes by youth.⁴ As a result of increasing the MLSA, smoking rates in Needham high schools decreased by 47%.⁵ Another study using a dynamic simulation model predicted that increasing the MLSA to 21 would reduce smoking among 15-17 year olds by over 50%—a greater reduction than doubling the price of cigarettes.⁶ Other research using simulation predicted a similar impact on smoking among 18 to 20 year olds.⁷

Age of Initiation Among Smokers

We used data from the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) to examine the average age smokers begin using cigarettes. The NSDUH is an annual national survey of individuals

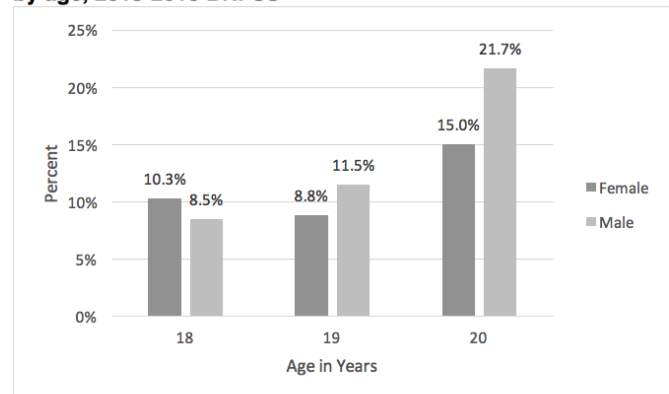
Table 1. Average age in years when cigarette smokers first tried and regularly smoked cigarettes, 2014 NSDUH

Age group	Average age in years	
	Tried cigarettes	Smoked cigarettes every day
12-17 years old	13.4	14.0
18+ years old	16.2	18.3

NSDUH, National Survey on Drug Use and Health

aged 12 and older.⁸ Our analysis suggests that the average adult smoker first tried cigarettes at age 16, but began smoking every day starting at 18 years old (Table 1). Unfortunately, these data are not publicly available for the state of Nebraska.

Figure 1. Percentage of males and females who are current smokers by age, 2013-2015 BRFSS



BRFSS, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System

Raising the MLSA in Nebraska

Data for Nebraska obtained from the 2013-2015 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) are presented in Figure 1. The BRFSS provides annual health-related survey data for adults at the state level.⁹ Among males, the percentage reporting that they are currently smoking ranges from 8.5% at age 18 to 21.7% at age 20; for females, the percentage increases to 15.0% by age 20. Overall, raising the MLSA to 21 years old would restrict cigarette sales for 9,720 current smokers aged 18 to 20.



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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of collaborating organizations or funders, or of the Regents of the University of Nebraska.

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